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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN SALVADORAN POLITICS: SLOW BUT STEADY PROGRESS

REF: SAN SALVADOR 1228

**¶1.** SUMMARY: Although in the wake of March elections, El Salvador now slightly outpaces the United States in its percentage of women legislators, it still lags behind several countries in the region in terms of the number of women elected to political office. Salvadoran women are also less likely to vote than their male counterparts. Women hold a number of important positions in the Saca administration and comprise three of five newly-confirmed Supreme Court justices, but there appears to be little significant difference among the nation's political parties in electing or appointing women to positions of power. President Saca's Special Commissioner for Governability, Gloria Salguero Gross, is training a new generation of women to be the country's future political leaders. END SUMMARY.

**¶2.** Fourteen women deputies were elected in March 12 nationwide elections--a 55 percent increase over the number of women in the 2003-2006 Legislative Assembly; with women now comprising around 17 percent of its legislature, El Salvador ranks approximately 65th among the world's parliaments in representation of women. However, women were the victors in only about six percent of mayoral races in 2003 and 2006. Three of the five new Supreme Court justices selected and confirmed April 30 by the outgoing 2003-2006 Legislative Assembly are women (see reftel: Dolores "Lolly" Claros de Ayala, Rosa Maria Fortin Huezo, and Evelyn Roxana Nunez Franco); from all reports, all five new justices are better-qualified and less politically-partisan than the large majority of their predecessors.

**¶3.** Unlike the U.S., where all recent Census Bureau data indicate that women are more likely to register and vote, Salvadoran women are less likely to vote than their male counterparts (although they compose a slight majority--54 percent--of registered voters). Some political observers theorize that women do not vote because of apathy, while others believe it is because of competing family obligations.

(Note: Public-service radio announcements during the recent campaign season encouraged men to assist their wives with household responsibilities on election day in order to facilitate their voting. End note.)

**¶4.** High-profile women in the Saca administration include Vice President Ana Vilma de Escobar, Minister of the Economy Yolanda de Gavidia, Minister of Education Darlyn Meza, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs for Salvadorans Abroad Margarita Escobar, Vice Minister of Governance Silvia Aguilar, Special Commissioner for Governability Gloria Salguero Gross, Vice Minister of the Economy for Commerce and Industry Blanca Imelda de Magana, Vice Minister for the Environment Michelle Gallardeo de Gutierrez, Central Reserve Bank President Luz Maria Serpas de Portillo, Consumer Protection Commissioner Evelyn Jacir de Lobo, and President's Saca's Technical Undersecretary Anabella Larde. First Lady Ana Ligia de Saca holds the honorary position of National Secretary of the

Family, and has been active in her advocacy for families, including promotion of programs to prevent at-risk youth from joining gangs. Charismatic and highly-popular former Foreign Minister Maria Eugenia "Mayu" Brizuela de Avila is often mentioned as a future ARENA presidential candidate.

¶15. While the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) includes the equality of women in their political platform (as enshrined in Article 3 of the Salvadoran Constitution), in actual practice, they do little better in electing women to positions of power than other parties. Former FMLN Deputy Violeta Menjivar narrowly defeated her ARENA counterpart on March 12 to retain San Salvador city hall for the FMLN. (Note: During the 2003-2006 Legislative Assembly, two of the FMLN's most high-profile women deputies, Celina Monterrosa and Ileana Rogel, were forced out of the party due to their lack of adherence to orthodox hardliners' policies. End note.)

¶16. ARENA's Gloria Salguero Gross was the first woman elected President of the Legislative Assembly (1994-1997), and now serves as President Saca's Special Commissioner for Governability. Salguero Gross, in conjunction with the Business Foundation for Educational Development (FEPADE), holds weekly classes to train prospective women candidates in developing a platform, running a political campaign, and interacting with the media. These weekly classes enjoy high attendance, and include women from all parts of the political spectrum; Salguero Gross hopes to expand the program if additional funding can be secured.

¶17. Comment: Notwithstanding traditional characteristics of Latin American culture that have heretofore limited the participation of women in politics and held back their attainment of political power, Salvadoran women continue to

make advances, and when elected or appointed to high office, they are usually evaluated fairly on the basis of job performance. (Note: In recent polls, Minister of Education Darlyn Meza is the second most highly-rated political figure after President Saca. End note.) The young women Gross is now training will unquestionably play a significant role in the nation's political future.

Barclay